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The Link Between the Type of Attachment and Religiosity

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Abstract

Motivation: This paper aims to show the central role of the notion of attachment in human behavior, the image of God in the representation of the believer as a parental figure and as an oversized attachment figure in the personal relationships, social and religious behavior. **Methods:** Scientific and comparative studies of different concepts from psychology of religion, social psychology, psychoanalytic theory, cognitive psychology as well as theory, research and behavioral studies. **Results:** Attachment to God seems to develop in a coordinated way with the maturation of attachment to the primary figure but also with the development of cognitive processes involved. In addition, in case of danger, loss and separation are validate the human and common response to approach God as a substitute figure of attachment, the intensification of religious activities. **Conclusions:** The need for attachment and attachment for religion is one of the prerogatives of survival, development and growth and it is present in all-important areas of the life, culture and in all societies. People who develop a secure attachment are less prone to become religious over time.

Keywords: Attachment, Religiosity, Oversized Parental Figure, Primary Figure, Representation, Maturation, Anxiety, Avoidance

1. Introduction

1.1. The attachment theory

J. Bowlby developed the attachment theory around the 1950s, a theory that assimilates concepts from psychoanalytic theory, ethology, and cognitive psychology (Atkinson et al., 2002). Attachment theory focuses on the connection created between the child and the parent during development. Bowlby states that attachment is a behavior resulting from gaining or maintaining proximity, “a fundamental human need to seek protection, comfort, and support” (Golu, 2015, p. 85).

According to this theory, babies perform a series of innate attachment behaviors. These behaviors are laughing, crying, sucking and grabbing. The reason why babies exhibit these behaviors is to maintain physical closeness to the figure of attachment, and aim at the survival of the baby in possible dangerous environmental situations (Abbasi et al., 2016). The most important characteristics of the attachment relationship are the availability and responsiveness of the parent. Responsiveness refers to the way the parent reacts to the signals sent by the child, so “the adult's responsiveness to the child's signals is decisive in forming a secure attachment” (Golu, 2015, p. 86).

As time passes and the parent-child interactions increase, the child will develop strong beliefs and expectations about the availability and responsiveness of parents, but also conceptions of themselves as deserving or not the parental affection (Bylsma et al., 1997). These beliefs are mental models and conceptualized as mental representations of the knowledge gained from experience about attachment figures (Bowlby, 1973).

Attachment theorists argue that there are two dimensions that underlie the development of patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about relationships (Foster et al., 2007), namely anxiety and avoidance.

Anxiety describes the tendency to worry about rejection and the availability of others at times when the person needs support, while avoidance refers to the tendency to avoid intimacy and closeness in relationships. It develops from interpersonal experiences characterized by inconsistency of availability and support by parental attachment figures, for this reason people with a predominantly anxious attachment expect inconsistencies when they need the availability of others (Foster et al., 2007). Avoidance develops from interpersonal experiences characterized by total lack of availability and support by parental attachment figures, which is why these people have learned not to expect availability and support from others, being insensitive to such signals (Foster et al., 2007).

1.2. Types of attachment

Attachment theory holds that primordial interactions with primary caregivers have a lasting effect on how the person will engage in close relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1969).

According to the classification model of attachment types proposed by Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991), interaction with parents results in the construction of positive or negative mental models of how the individual perceives himself (*model of self*) and others (*model of others*), and the types of attachment are classified as follows: securing, anxious, fearful avoiding, and avoiding by rejection.

The security person has a positive outlook on both himself and others, these people have high self-esteem, high confidence in others, having a conception of self, based on a real, valid context (Hampton et al., 2011). The relationships in which people engage with this type of attachment are on reciprocity, closeness, respect, and trust (Bylsma et al., 1997; Passanisi et al., 2015). Secure attachment is characterized by a low level of anxiety and avoidance, is associated with satisfactory close relationships.

The avoidant type by rejection has a positive perception of himself and a negative perception of others. They may have a high level of self-esteem, but they suppress their desire and need to engage in an intimate, close relationship, which is why they are perceived as having low sociability (Passanisi et al., 2015). These people believe that they can be loved, but have a general feeling of distrust of others and expect not to be able to rely on them, or even be rejected by those around them. (Bylsma et al., 1997). Avoidant attachment by rejection is characterized by a high level of avoidance and a low level of anxiety (Foster et al., 2007).

Individuals with an anxious attachment style have a negative perception of themselves and a positive perception of others, which is why they tend to have an increased dependence on other people (Passanisi et al., 2015). People with this type of attachment feel that they cannot be loved, but they believe that other people are trustworthy and available (Bylsma et al., 1997).

People who have a fearful-avoidant attachment style have a negative perception of both themselves and others (Passanisi et al., 2015). People who show this type of attachment have the perception that they are not worthy of being loved, and at the same time they perceive others as not people they can rely on and who will reject them (Bylsma et al., 1997).

2. Methods and materials

2.1. *The link between religion and attachment theory*

The idea that the basic aspects of religious experience and behavior can be understood in connection with the theory of attachment was pioneered by Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 1994). In particular, Kirkpatrick proposed that the relationships with God perceived by believers tend to resemble the defining criteria for attachment relationships, and therefore they function psychologically like other attachment structures. In developing this idea, numerous factors, both social and cultural, as well as related to the specificity of the initial attachment link form facets to explain this link (Granqvist et al., 2020).

The first aspect we can look at in investigating the relationship between religion and attachment theory is the very origin of the term religion. It comes from the Latin word "religare" or "relegere" and means "to be bound" (Ferm, 1945). Monotheistic religions are based on faith in a personal God with whom believers have a personal relationship (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The idea of connection with a personal God already creates a framework similar to that in which attachment relationships are formed and, therefore, carries the same psychological valences as those related to human attachment figures.

In addition, the centralization of the notion of love/attachment in most religions is another relevant factor in the development of this topic. In monotheistic religions, the relationship with a personal God is marked by love, and the centrality of love felt as coming from God is often found in the accounts of people who convert, who compare the process of conversion with that of falling in love (Thouless, 1923). Ullman (1982) conducted one of the most consistent studies on religious conversions and in his conclusions states that from his interviews with people who converted "what we initially considered a change of ideology primarily, proved to be more like a love affair. The conversion revolves around a sudden attachment, a passion for a real or imagined figure that appears against the background of a great emotional turmoil."

One of the most intuitive statements in approaching this subject is the image of God in the representations of the faithful as a parental figure, which offers protection and refuge from dangers. This representation is formed based on biblical structures (for example, Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the city of my life; whom shall I fear?") with which are raised the persons whose education also includes a religious side. For them, in the simplified representation meant to answer questions about what God is like, the explanations revolve around an image of a good parent, who cares for his children and wants to help them grow well, who punishes when his children make mistakes and who protects against dangers. Beyond these first coordinates that children receive related to God, in the ecclesiastical representation of religion there are numerous reinforcements of this concept. The very notion of the father of the priest, who is the representative of God (in Christianity, of God's Son as Bishop) in the church, represents a connotative function for this principle. In addition, other sources underlying the Christian faith are vocal in this regard, such as the Our Father prayer. Consequently, studies on this topic, on the images that people have about God, constantly emit as the main factor, the parental figure, loaded with a series of descriptors connected to the attachment figure, such as lover, protector and caregiver (Tamayo & Desjardins, 1976).

This concept of the figure of God as an oversized figure of the father was famously enunciated by Freud (1927, 1961) and is the main succession left to the psychology of religion. Beyond this legacy, however, modern theorists point out that the image of God as an oversized attachment figure is more appropriate, rather than just the father, because God captures the essence of both valences and includes as many maternal as paternal characteristics (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

2.2. Implication of relationship between religious attitudes and attachment types

Attachment to God seems to develop in a coordinated way with the maturation of attachment to the primary figures, but also with the development of cognitive processes that can support the concept, such as symbolic thinking and mentalization. These advances in cognitive functioning decrease children's dependence on physical contact with primary caregivers and increase their ability to rely on internalized sources of emotional security. In addition, the completion of these stages of development allows children to represent their intangible abstract entities as God and to be able to refer to them as attachment figures (Cherniak et al., 2020).

According to the theory, the unavailability of a primary attachment figure activates an attachment behavior designed to restore an adequate degree of proximity. However, quickly, in the early stages of development, an individual can anticipate that efforts to achieve an appropriate approach to the figure of attachment will not be successful, and in this case: "Whenever the natural object of the attachment is not available, the behavior can be directed to a substitute object. Even if it is inanimate, such an object often appears feasible to play the initial role, although secondary to the primary figure of attachment. Like the main figure of attachment, the lifeless replacement is sought especially when the child is tired, sick or stressed." (Bowlby, 1982).

This statement of Bowlby explains people's behavior to address God as a figure of attachment (substitute for primary figures) especially in conditions of perceived danger or in situations of distress (suffering), also validated in a quick look at human responses in case of danger, loss and separation from a leading figure of attachment, war and other extreme living conditions. Behavioral responses in these situations primarily aim at approaching God as a substitute figure of attachment, through the almost unconscious call to prayer, the intensification of religious activities, the search for answers in the field of theological explanations, etc.

However, these affective and behavioral responses do not appear only in isolated situations of distress, but they are also present in precarious relational situations in adulthood. Kirkpatrick (1997) reports that during a 4-year study period, women with an anxious romantic attachment pattern established a renewed relationship with God and reported significant religious experiences, which they describe with expressions such as "being born again" and speak in tongues more often than women with secure attachment speak.

3. Conclusions

Studies in the literature suggest that people who report past experiences consistent with the pattern of insecure attachment or who present a pattern of insecure attachment today tend to become more and more religious over time. A determining factor for the increase of religiosity is the need to regulate the intense suffering, mentioned above. For reasons of probability, over time, the chances of a person exposed to several events that cause these feelings increase. Given that the need to regulate suffering through a surrogate attachment figure is relatively low or alternates with a new intimate relationship with another person, religiosity as a result of growing older no longer has the same consistency (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2003).

In my opinion, given that attachment is one of the primary prerogatives of survival and development and one of the essential elements of growth; it is normal, on the one hand, for its implications, or reminiscences of them, to be found in all areas important to people. On the other hand, people's need for religiosity and to relate to a superior figure who can provide protection and love is a human condition proven by the test of endurance over time and its ubiquity in the whole diversity of human societies. Thus, looking from this perspective at the complementarity between the importance of the attachment structure for human development and functioning and the need for religion, equally validated by time and presence in all societies; it becomes a little surprising that there is a connection between the two and they influence each other. However, this does not negate the fact that the mechanisms of this relationship are very interesting to study.

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